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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

A principal has to be a facilitator more than a director. He or she has to work as part of a team and to face challenges with a "we" viewpoint rather than a "I say, you do." Not only does the principal of today have to collaborate with teachers, students and parents; they also need to be aware of the larger community outside of the school. A child in the school may have needs that go beyond the classroom and the effective administrator will be able to call upon support services to meet the needs of that child as well as adopt a new textbook.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Joseph M. Bearns

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It was on a journey to Dubuque from Cedar Falls for a funeral of a staff member of our school that my principal asked if I had given consideration to becoming a principal. At that time I was content as a classroom teacher and coach of twenty years. A realization that at forty-two years of age, it was time to decide if I was going to continue the journey I started in education or had my journey already reached the conclusion?

Aristotle pointed out that while some things are best learned through formal instruction, there are others, like the habits of the heart, that require doing (MacNichol, 1993). I had to answer many questions. Could I become an effective administrator? Could I commit the time and money that I knew would be involved in the study of elementary administration? Despite all of my education and my years of teaching, I had to look into my heart to say, yes!

Over the next two years, I evaluated my experiences in a new light and sought answers to my questions. Although I was an effective teacher, did I have what it would take to be an effective administrator? Did my love of children come first or did I feel a need to be in control? I approached many people, foremost my current administrator for advice. I was told that I had what it would take to make a difference in children's lives. Subsequent experiences in leadership seminars and opportunities to observe administrators in their day-to-day work helped with my decision to pursue a degree in Educational Administration. My wife, also a

teacher, was instrumental in my final decision as I knew there would be costs in money and time away from my family .

Personal Characteristics

As the oldest child in a family of five, I was blessed with the opportunity to gain a college education which was not available to my younger sisters. My parents struggled to support our family, my father working in a parts department of an automobile dealership and my mother as a part time cleaning lady at a bank. Early in my life, I learned that my father turned down a college scholarship to support his own large family before going off to fight in World War II. At the conclusion of the war, he married and for the rest of his life felt limited in his career with little hope for advancement. Early in my life it was instilled in me by my parents that they wanted their children to have more opportunity than they had. High expectations were set in schooling and behavior with the result that upon high school graduation, I knew that I would be attending college.

My parents made many sacrifices so their children could attend and graduate from Catholic schools. I felt that I could never let my parents down. This attitude is part of who I am and will be with me the rest of my life.

The first step on my journey was not related to education but my goal was a degree in engineering. I was good at mechanical things and felt that the financial rewards would follow. I began with my general education courses and

found that I was not as motivated as I thought for engineering. My grades were passing but I could not see past the present and did not do any more than necessary to stay in school. Weekly letters of support from my mother were instrumental in helping me to stay focused on school but I had no desire to excel. I was putting in the time but did not have my heart in my classes.

Two turning points occurred during my sophomore year. I took a class, Teacher and Child, as part of a university requirement. One part of our assignment was to observe a class at the Price Laboratory School. I was fortunate to be placed with a teacher who felt that observers should also be participants. I was given a small group of five students that I met with for forty-five minutes weekly to discuss their social studies assignments. At our last meeting, a young sixth grade girl commented that she learned a lot from me and my decision to become a teacher was born. As Kearns (1995) noted, "Education is for everyone. It goes on all the time and happens everywhere" (p. 5). The fact that I was in an educational environment helped push me in the direction of teaching.

The second occurrence that would forever change my life was the meeting of a young lady who would become my wife. We married the following fall and due to financial struggles for both of our families, we decided to work for a year prior to returning to school. Our challenges became greater with the birth of our daughter but so did our resolve to work toward returning to college. I worked two

jobs, my wife worked full time and we became quite comfortable and the thought of not returning to college weighed on us. I was offered a management position in one job and comments of family and friends were that returning to school would cost too much. There was still inside me the desire to go further in my life than my father was permitted to. My wife and I also knew we had much to offer as teachers.

We did return to school after that year and I found that coming back, especially with the responsibilities of a family gave me the push I needed to set goals and work hard at achieving them. I found the self-discipline that was lacking my first two years of college.

I completed my studies at the University of Northern Iowa and began seeking a teaching position. The first job offer came about in San Antonio, Texas. My wife and I discussed being so far from home and when offers came to teach in Iowa we drove to San Antonio and signed the contract believing that it would be a challenge for us to live away from family. As I look back, I gained invaluable experience working with minority students as well as leadership opportunities as a teacher and coach.

My wife's desire to complete her studies to be a teacher led to our return to Cedar Falls. I was hired at St. Patrick's Catholic School and was content for many years to be a classroom teacher and coach volleyball. The question asked

by my principal began to grow until I decided that it was time to take the next step in my life, that of being an educational leader. Again, I asked, did I have what it would take?

That self-discipline was put to the test when I began my course work. I took a class, Introduction to Educational Administration, from Dr. Larry McNeal in the summer of 1993. The purpose of the course was to give an overview of the administrative field to aspiring principals. He handed us a 500 page booklet which covered the introduction of administration well. I began to see the challenges that lie ahead. By the end of the course, I had a better idea of what it would take to be an administrator. I wanted to, as Christ (1995) said so well, "make a difference, a lasting impression on young learners" (p. 35). I still have that booklet and have referred to it from time to time as a reminder of all of the areas that I have covered in my coursework and to never forget any area that may cause me to be less than an effective principal.

In the past, principals were seen as leaders who led and the teachers followed. Today, with shared decision making, with a school climate that fosters cooperation over competition, with community interest and involvement increasing, principals must do more than ever to help children become better citizens of tomorrow. Society has changed and is ever changing. Our children are our future more than ever before. The world has more exciting possibilities than

ever for those wishing to be a part of that future. The schools are our future.

They need to be effective to succeed.

Effective Schools

To improve the environment for teachers an effective administrator will look for ways to help them do their job better, with fewer distractions. If there are too many students or student needs to be met, one needs to work cooperatively with the teachers to determine if providing teacher aides or parent volunteers can make their tasks more meaningful and less stressful. The hiring of a "floating sub" would be a way to enable a new graduate to gain experience as a teacher. For example, assisting and working with his or her peers, helping small groups of students with basic facts in math and reading comprehension. As a certified teacher who already knows the school, its philosophy, that person would be an ideal substitute if another teacher was ill. That person would also have an opportunity to be appointed as a teacher should a vacancy occur. Another way to approach this area of concern would be through creative scheduling using retired, part-time teachers. Teachers need the opportunity to reflect upon the best ways to teach their students. Giving them that time will ultimately help the students.

Reitzug and Burrello (1995) state that "administrators who encourage their teachers toward reflective practices are creating opportunity for better teaching and greater success for students. Teachers reflecting on their

performance will improve their performance and the students are the winners"

(p. 49).

Teacher input is also critical. A good administrator would like the teachers in the school to be involved in decision-making as much as possible. Clark (1995) states that "the notion of the principal who acts as the all-knowing patriarch of the school and wisely solves all problems is passé. Principals must be team builders" (p. 9). A staff needs to function as a team in which everyone collaborates on discipline policy, student expectations and the learning environment. Teachers can also be leaders. A weak teacher does not make a weak school, but a weak administrator can be devastating for a school. One should explore ways in which we can reward our teachers both within and outside the school.

Opportunities to expand the teachers' roles in meaningful ways will help with teacher satisfaction. Outstanding principals go beyond merely involving teachers in decision-making. They encourage teachers to continuously engage in identifying best practices. This type of principal practices three types of behaviors that help their teachers become more reflective practitioners. They provide a supportive environment, use specific behaviors to facilitate reflective practices, and make it possible for teachers to implement ideas and programs

(Reitzug & Burrello, 1995). Once the environment for the teacher improves, the student environment will follow.

Students will see that teachers are committed to learning and role models, worthy of emulating. Learning needs to be valued by students in order for a school to be more effective. Students need to have an interest in school. It needs to be a place where they want to come, not seek escape from. Up-to-date materials that are challenging and interesting will be exciting for the teachers to teach and the students to learn. Even now, my best classes in graduate school are taught by interested instructors who care about their students. One is motivated to work harder when lessons become meaningful. We should be able to do the same for our children. Collaboration between principal and teachers as well as parents and community will result in successful learning experiences for children. If a teacher has an idea that taking the children to the grocery store to learn math and make it more interesting to the student, an able administrator will be the first to make the phone calls to get parent volunteers to drive. Heller and Lundquist (1990) noted that "Because parents have a vested interest in their children's schools, it is important for principals to be aware of areas of concern to them" (p. 41). Instead of all ideas coming from the top, whether it is the building administrator or central office, the teachers and even the children should have input into their learning. One school district in St. Charles, Illinois recognized the

need for a more effective approach to education. They proceeded to change, but began from the bottom up. Teachers were encouraged to implement new strategies in the classrooms, then grade levels, then principals and finally, changes were encouraged at the district level. Once teachers became comfortable with change, that change then became district wide in mission statements (Koski, 1993).

As this collaboration is increased among those interested in the best experiences for children, learning will improve. Riley (1993) suggests that, "by employing a bottom-up approach to management and utilizing community partnerships, South Carolina schools experienced great success in their learning programs"(p. 6). One novel idea is for principals to utilize the "grapevine" in their schools. Rakes (1993) says that, "two types of communication found in organizations are the formal and informal networks. The grapevine is surprisingly swift and 80% accurate" (p. 17).

School and Community

No matter how well trained the administrator and teachers are, no matter how up-to-date the instructional materials and the curriculum are or how new (or old) the school; if parent-community involvement is not present, achieving the model school status is limited. As part of helping teachers and students feel a part of the school, one needs to explore ways to bring parents and community into

the school. One example could be setting up a partnership between a school and a local senior care center. It represents hours of work but if the principal encourages teachers by making time available, offering advice, etc., it can happen. This happened at St. Patrick's ten years ago and we now are sending a generation of students onto high school with an appreciation of our senior citizens. A daughter of one elderly lady mentioned to me the joy her 98 year old mother received when the children came to visit throughout the year. One can imagine the public relations the community has for a school if this experience is repeated over and over.

In the 1980's a report called "A Nation at Risk" addressed the negatives of our schools. An administrator has to believe that there are good things happening in every school. We can build on these and make good schools even better. Willie (1994) states that "the major task before educators today is to discover ways of reestablishing trust and confidence between teachers and students and parents and schools" (p. 10). One should want to add to this statement that we also need to bring the community into our schools in a positive way. There needs to be such a positive community feeling about its schools that bond issues will routinely pass when it comes to improving our schools.

Vision and Values

As aspiring administrators, we have been blessed by the assistance of professors and the contributions of fellow students. We all share the same dream, that vision of what an effective principal should do and be like. The principal must have a clear vision for his or her school. There must be specific objectives in place and a sense of shared purpose so that this vision becomes a reality.

Part of my vision for the children is to bring into the schools those parts of society that can help our schools. There are a large group of people in a school community who are not contacted until there is a bond issue. These include the retirees, the elderly and those without children. If we can establish ongoing communication with this group, making them feel a part of the school, we can take giant strides toward a better educational climate. In my current school we send communications to every school family.

In the past, we had maintained communication with every family who no longer had children in the school by a Booster Club newsletter. Not only was this service appreciated, it resulted in financial support and volunteers for supporting the sport's program. The program was discontinued when I left the position of athletic director. I would not hesitate to start a similar program as principal of a school. If people know what is happening in the schools, they may be more supportive of these schools when called upon for support.

Another part of vision is that the administrator must feel that every child in the school is gifted. In our schools today there is a mis-match between the child's motivation and the opportunities to learn in the classroom. It seems that children lose their excitement for learning as they continue attending school. Whitmore (1986) says that, "learning is the natural activity of children. All youngsters, especially those who are gifted, want to master knowledge and skills, to feel successful in school and to be valued personally" (p. 67). If a principal is sincere about having a successful school, the vision will include helping every child feel like a winner in that school.

Without stating it, we also as students and teachers need to ensure that our schools have values in place. Fullen (1992) reports in "Visions that Blind" that principals should have a vision, but they should not be blinded by their vision. "Principals are blinded by their vision when they feel they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it" (p. 19).

Effective leaders need to collaboratively determine the values of their communities and be willing to not only maintain these values but also nudge them in the direction so that children can enter the adult world better able to face problems than their parents were.

For example, as a long time student and a teacher in a Catholic school system, I feel that these schools value discipline more than the public schools.

One cannot "convert" a public school but one can, as principal, work with teachers and parents to see that higher expectations are in place for discipline. Each year our school accepts students who may have had discipline problems in another school. (I acknowledge that this can work both ways.) A young first grade boy entered our school in November after two months at a local public school. His parents stated that he was in the office every day. He was transferred three times before being admitted to our school. He is a challenging young man with many problems and in need of a lot of caring. By working together, with consistent discipline, teachers have enabled the boy to thrive and there are few disruptions.

As an aspiring elementary principal, I know that solving potential discipline problems in the upper grades starts when the children are young. I feel a good administrator, with the partnership of parents and teachers can work to find underlying causes of discipline problems. Creating high expectations for students can help a child enjoy school and not cause disruptions. Children want to learn and need an environment that will help them.

In the (January 17, 1999) Waterloo Courier newspaper, there was an article in which students at an area public high school did a survey and determined that 70-80% of the students would not wear uniforms despite seeing advantages of wearing uniforms in local Catholic schools. These area high school students also responded to the results in the California public schools in which the wearing of

uniforms had resulted in 50% reduction of discipline problems and fewer dropouts. As an educational leader, I would try to bring to the community the idea that more discipline and higher expectations, while initially opposed by students, may in fact be in the best interest of the students.

There is also ongoing discussions concerning tightening the grade point for student athletes. If we lower the standards for extra-curricular participation, we might as well lower the standards for following society's laws, for products created in our factories and for inter-personal relationships. If the school day or school year is not long enough to help the children reach expectations, more creative solutions will solve the problems, not lowering standards. Marshall (1995) states that: "Learning should not be defined by the calendar but by student performance" (p. 10).

Another value is that of caring or nurturing our children. Although the majority of teachers can state that they care about their students, many are overwhelmed by the day-to-day stress to give one-on-one talks to a student, to make that necessary parent phone call (better still, personal visit) to the home. Reitzug and Burrello (1995) reveal that: "Of formal importance of our schools is to help our children realize that they are part of a caring community"(p. 49).

A child in school may have needs that go beyond the classroom and the caring administrator who values the best for that child will call upon or establish support services to help meet the needs of that child.

If teachers in our schools are shown that consistent discipline will result in fewer behavior problems, that time is made for sharing and caring for students, they will respond in a positive way. Boyer (1994) said that: "Every child has a right to an excellent education and if standards are high enough, children will succeed" (p. 11) Raeback (1994) agrees with him in that schools need to be transformed into humane enterprises. There are cases where a group of students would pick on another child. A caring administrator would determine who the ringleader(s) might be and not discipline them for that behavior (unless necessary) but rather set high expectations for the students as leaders. It takes more time but you can see a change in student behavior over time as he or she is called upon to work one-on-one with the educational leader in seeing that everyone gets along socially. Personal problems are the number one obstacle to student learning. Help the children feel safe and loved and they will respond in a positive way in the classroom. We can talk about new technologies and ways to improve learning for the children, but if a child does not feel that the school is personal, educators will have a difficult time motivating that child.

Smilow (1993) says that:

At a time when many urban schools are locked from the inside to protect the safety of their children, (effective) educators are looking beyond the walls of the classroom to help children find meaning and purpose in their educational lives. (p. 22)

Conclusion

In recent years I have seen many changes in our schools that show a principal has to be a facilitator more than a director. He or she has to work as part of a team and to face challenges with a "we" viewpoint rather than a "I say, you do." Not only does the principal of today have to work collaboratively with teachers, students and parents; they also need to be aware of the larger community outside of the school. A child in the school may have needs that go beyond the classroom and the effective administrator will be able to call upon support services to meet the needs of that child as well as adopt a new textbook.

I mentioned that principals must provide supportive environments for teachers and students. I believe that principals must be risk takers and allow their teachers to do the same. More teamwork will help teachers collectively take responsibility for the children as well as allow mutual support to one another.

Principals must allow reflective practices. Are challenging questions being asked? Are we doing the best that we can as leaders? We need to challenge the way things have always been done if it means a better education for the children. The teachers need to be valued and the children need to be loved. The parents need to feel their children are safe.

The administrator has a difficult job if he or she is putting out fires such as dealing with discipline. There is a need to anticipate problems. Challenge the

teachers and students to respect one another, to respect differences, to resolve conflicts so that learning can take place in the school.

Today one can see that many children need to be able to develop the self-discipline that I was fortunate to have gained after many years. They may not have the support of their families, there may be many obstacles in the way of a fulfilling future. It could be poverty, a single-parent home, violence in the neighborhood. My three children had positive self-concepts and the skills necessary to be happy and successful in their lives instilled in them by their parents and the support of the schools. There is no reason why all children cannot have this opportunity.

The question asked by my principal on the road to Dubuque several years ago can now be answered with a definite, "yes!"

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